

THRILLING

AUG. 25c

Wonder

FEATURING
Lords of the Morning
By EDMOND HAMILTON

—
Cholwell's Chickens
By JACK VANCE

STORIES

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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AUGUST, 1952

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Is a rose, a rose, a rose on Mars?

Sort of Like A FLOWER

By

JEROME BIXBY



THE SUN had been setting over the purple gray of those low hills to the "west"—a far, squat disc of lonely gold. And the flash, like the spitting of a match, had seemed to leap from that sinking sun, to jag out like a prominence. In reality, it had been some ninety million miles closer. Not a prominence, but Earth—blowing up.

Earth had been dead for a week now. Annixter thought some about it and all its people, but not as much as before. There's something about utter, idiotic self-annihilation that doesn't lend itself to retrospective searchings. Cancer, cut out. As if it had never existed at all, thought Annixter.

Mike came in from the garden. She was ruddy from the Mars evening cool; her blue eyes shone as she smiled at him.

"Come on and see, Harry!" She took Annixter's hand and led him out of their hut to the garden. "Look! Look there—those string bean things are really coming up!"

They were. Like upthrust knife-blades, with little budding pods ranging alternately along the fuzzy stalks. But not green beans, thought Annixter.

There aren't any more green beans.

"And the eggplants—" Mike went on. She beckoned her man to a bending position, from which he studied the plump purple ovoids. Not eggplants. Something else now—coming up from strange soil. Something nameless, by Mars, out of eggplant seeds.

MIKE led him happily on through the garden. Different kinds of vegetables, all resembling their Earthly antecedents, but each no longer of a strain. Bastardized by Mars' alien chemistry, made new in shape and color and odor by the new world. How they tasted, only Peterson knew—the biologist had been picking and fussing around recently, gathering specimens for analysis, imploring that no one touch the stuff until he reported on it.

The peas were pink. Annixter turned away.

Mike saw the queer look on his face, and her hand went to his arm. "I know . . . Mars changes things. But we'll get used to it, Harry. At least, *we're* the same. Even if our great-grandchildren have two heads or whatever, they'll be

human beings inside, just like us, and that's all that counts. So Earth isn't really gone—"

Annixter shook his head slowly. "I wonder, hon. I . . . when that stuff finally begins to *look* good to us—if we like the taste—all our criteria—" He stopped, thinking.

Mike smiled puzzledly, squeezing his arm.

"Hiya, Anny!"

It was Rupert, the Iowan, leaning over the fence, sucking at a long sliver of wood. My God, thought Annixter; if it weren't for that spaceship sitting over there, the tents and funny wood huts and that canal running off into the distance—I'd swear I was somewhere out in the Midwest.

"My garden's purtier'n yours," grinned Rupert. He waved a big hand behind him. Mike and Annixter moved to the fence to see. It wasn't a fence exactly, but part of the spaceship's central guide rail, disassembled and used here on the hill and in the valley below to bound the small plots of experimental agriculture—different fertilizers, different bacteria used in the water—to see what grew best where. Part of the spaceship's central guide rail—it wouldn't be needed any more as such. Not until someone rediscovered the atom.

Rupert's garden *was* prettier. Captain Dewell—Dewell, the famous philosopher—had made the plans, he'd built the ship. And when the H-War reached the Rockies, when he'd gathered his brood for the take-off from outside L. A.—"Bring along some trifles," he'd said at the last moment; "it'll make you feel better, and there's a little room to spare."

Blasting up, out over the Pacific and away from it. Forty people, heavy in their nets. Tons of supplies; microfilms of books, music; some machinery; all carefully amassed. And the trifles. Among the trifles: two cats, two dogs, Peterson's tropical fish, a canary, a pampered stowaway mouse, gadgets,

every kind of little thing—whims, personal things. Some flower seeds. Rupert's.

"Look at that!" said Rupert with pride.

"That" was a rosebush, full flowered, its blood-red blossoms shaming the rust of the soil beneath them. It's an honest-to-God rosebush, thought Annixter, surprised. No change, no mutation or deformation. A plain, simple rosebush. He and Mike ducked under the chrome rail and knelt beside it.

"It's doing fine," Rupert was saying. "Take a look—only flowers on Mars. Damned planet doesn't seem to have any of its own."

"No," Annixter said, "it doesn't."

TENDERLY, he cupped a rose in his hand and inhaled its fragrance. A thorn touched his palm, not pricking it, just a sharp pressure that made the skin itch deep inside.

"There's one of those bat things again!" Mike pointed overhead. A black, spatulate-winged creature tacking back and forth in the upper air, its shrill, crowlike cry drifting down.

The sun—that same squat, red sun—was setting. The wind chilled and came faster, breaking path for evening. The rows of growing things, humanity's crops, rustled their strange leaves and twitched them at the reddening sky.

"It came up so fast," Rupert said. "It's frightening—just shot up! Planted it only a week ago. On the day that Earth . . . I planted the other flower seeds too. Only this one showed. The rest—" he looked regretfully at the little pile of withered brown shoots he had just dug up.

Mike stooped and tweaked a stem. "May I, Rupert?"

"I—" Rupert moved a hand, dropped it—"well, yes—of course."

She snapped off the bloom and put it in her hair. Then she pirouetted and skipped while Annixter and Rupert stood by, smiling a little. Annixter's eyes, falling beyond her form for a mo-

ment, saw Dewell come out of the spaceship and turn up the hill toward the garden space.

Mike stopped suddenly, her head cocking to one side. "Say, Rupert—" she came back to where the two men stood — "let's pick all these roses and give one to each of the girls! There's just about enough to go around!"

"Oh, hell," Rupert stepped over to the bush. "Not on your life—my pride and joy!"

"But," Mike went on enthusiastically, "then, when they fade, we could all make like bees and have a thousand rose-bushes! Don't forget, there're maybe no insects to pollenate your pride and joy!"

Rupert considered this, his long face sober. "Pollenate cut flowers, Mike? There's no future in it. But—well, I don't know—" he studied his knuckles—"after all, it is a perennial. I guess they'd get a kick out of it, wouldn't they?"

"They're women, Iowa. They're starved for a little something—like flowers to wear in their hair."

"Good idea!" applauded Dewell, who had reached them unnoticed. "And a lovely performance, my dear. I'm glad we managed to bring the charm of ballet to our new home." The breeze tossed his thick, white hair as he bent over the rosebush. "By all means, let us pick them!"

CAREFULLY, one by one, they removed the blossoms from their stems, putting them into Annixter's jacket which he shed for that purpose. There were twenty-six of them, all deeply colored and fragrant.

"Won't the girls be surprised!" Mike said. She caressed the velvety petals with the hollow of her palm. "Give you men something to think about besides exploring and weather analyses and—"

"Mike!" Annixter's cry was crisp and chill, his horrified gaze upon her hair . . . "Your rose!"

Her hand sped to the rose. It wasn't

there. Some gray dust, a crumbling of black fibrous matter spilled down her cheek. Her eyes grew wide and round. "What—happened?"

"Freak," came Peterson's voice. "You shouldn't've picked them."

The lanky biologist hipped himself over the fence, came up to them trailing smoke from his pipe. "Something in the air—haven't pinned it down yet. Affects some of our plants, doesn't others. I'll lick it. Meantime, got to be careful. Got to make sure we have seeds before we start picking anything."

Rupert said, "Oh."

The other roses lost their red beauty. They turned to leprous gray and black; the stark veinwork of desiccation made them hideous.

Rupert turned his stricken gaze to the bush itself. Curling, flaking off, suddenly a tiny black-ashen snowfall at their feet.

"Ugh!" Mike shuddered and stepped back, brushing at her hair and cheek.

Annixter looked at Rupert. The Iowan was weeping, as a man weeps, with lips closed, eyes narrowed and bright.

"I'm sorry," Annixter said. He shook the stuff off his jacket and put it on.

"You couldn't know. But—" Rupert brushed his hand lightly over his cheeks — "no more flowers. You see, I love flowers . . . I loved flowers."

Dewell, his old face skilfully blank, turned slightly as Mike said something. She had stooped to the ground a little distance off, and now she held to their gaze the thing she had picked up—a small, ungainly cluster of black and purple berries on a thick, serrated stalk. It was ugly.

"Look," she said, "it's—sort of like a flower. Isn't it?" She didn't put it in her hair. It wouldn't have stayed, anyway. She stood there, biting her lip, shoving her toe at an "eggplant."

Dewell caught Annixter's eyes. They looked at each other for a moment, then at Rupert who stood looking at the thing Mike held, then at a point, empty

in the sky, vaguely near the rim of the distant sun that sank behind Mars' horizon.

Annixter remembered: "Even if our great-grandchildren have two heads or whatever, they'll be human beings inside, just like us, and that's all that counts"... "I wonder, hon... when that stuff finally begins to look good to us—all our criteria—" and what he had left unsaid: "Have we really saved Earth-kind? Even inside? Mars is potent, and we are few. What will the centuries make of us? What will we think beauti-

ful? Right? Wrong? Ugly? Won't it all... change too? I must ask Dewell about this."

But now—suddenly, surely—Annixter knew. He knew, and felt sick. He closed his eyes.

"Flower!" came Rupert's bitter voice. "You call that horror a flower!"

The sun's red shoulder disappeared. The alien night began to darken the hill, the valley below, the encampment and silent spaceship.

"Not now, Rupert," Dewell said finally. "But it will be. It will be."

THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 8)

back? Sam says he's a wee bit juvenile. How can you say that about stories like *Calling Captain Future*, *The Return Of Captain Future*, *Children Of The Sun*, and *Earthmen No More*? Especially the latter. No, the Captain has been and can be as adult as he is made to be. Furthermore, with him back in the mag again, there is a better chance of seeing him between hard-covers.

So, if you want him back again, write to Sam, to me, or to both of us. If you want him you can't sit back. It might be your vote that swings it. We need you. So write as soon as you see this, huh? FUTURE FOREVER!!! — *Three Bridges, N. J.*

We're off to a good start, as usual. I appreciate the spirited and—oh, entirely voluntary of course—defense. Don't count on it for an immediate revival of *Cap Future*, though. What with our esteemed contemporary, *LIFE*, uttering the immortal words "there is a case for interplanetary saucers," science fiction becomes respectable overnight and leaves a lot of fans high and dry. There's no telling where the stuff will go now. We're still closed Saturdays, Hank.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

by Pat Elewis

Dear Sam: If this letter should get published I can see the heading: "Ignorance Is Bliss." (Okay? —Ed.)

But am glad that Snell and Anderson will be battling it out via personal mail. Do you realize that in the first four paragraphs of an eleven paragraph letter, Snell had 6 nine-letter words, 10 ten-letter words, 1 eleven-letter word, 3 twelve-letter words, 11 thirteen-letter words, 2 sixteen-letter words, 1 fourteen and 1 eighteen letter word. Beyond the fourth paragraph I could not go. I've

worn my poor old Webster to a stub.

This ish (April) was good, especially the Pratt Fletcher. Am glad to see there will be a sequel. But I thought this ish could have had more variety. Almost missed it because I was looking for the identifying femme on the cover. I like anything but BEMS. Keep them inside: (Feminine view). So. Windham, Maine.

You mean inside, like the letter column?

PASS THE NOVOCAINE

by L. W. Carpenter, D.D.S.

Dear Sir: Having been a reader of your magazine for a goodly number of years, I have rejoiced and suffered silently and alternately as the contents of your pages were good, bad, and indifferent. However, I am pleased to say that the good far outshines the bad; else why would I still be reading it?

The outstanding authors and capable editors that have graced the inside of your mag have given it the stature and prestige enjoyed by very few in the field.

However, the lead story in the April issue finally convinced me that I have been silent too long; so I take this opportunity to exercise a prerogative enjoyed by stf fans everywhere, and speak my mind about DOUBLE JEOPARDY in particular.

For many years I have been an admirer of the illustrious Fletcher Pratt. This gifted writer and historian has the rare quality of always producing *fresh* plots and *novel* situations. But DOUBLE JEOPARDY! Can it be that the venerable gentleman is losing his grip?

Being a member of The Healing Arts profession, I am sure the noted Mr. Pratt will forgive me if I criticize his story from the standpoint of one who has necessarily gained a knowledge of physiology and pharmacology.

Mr. Pratt's story is constructed around a mirac-